DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 317 322 PS 018 726

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TITLE Taking Charge: Kindergartners' Planning and Leadership Talk During Committee Work.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Research; *Committees; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Educational Practices; Group Behavior; Grouping (Instructional Purposes); *Kindergarten Children; *Language Patterns; *Leadership; Learning Activities; *Planning; Primary Education

ABSTRACT

This study delineates features of the planning and leadership talk of kindergartners involved in committee work done in small groups. Subjects were 66 kindergarten children in 3 classes of one teacher. Committees were composed of four or five students and met during a 10-month period across 2 school years. the tasks of the committees were to: (1) create a list of items each child needed to bring for a tadpole collecting excursion; (2) make a mural recording observations of live silkworms; (3) create a mural that would inform next year's kindergartners about dinosaurs; (4) choose and do an activity to follow up a trip to a fire station; (5) create a mobile from a collection of fall plants; (6) record results of a test of objects' ability to float; (7) create a mural showing what the group knew about Indians; (8) make a "television program" on a paper scroll; (9) make a book and a drama of a fairy tale; and (10) show the class what the committee knew about dental health. Analyses of audiotaped data revealed planning and leadership categories in children's conversations. Planning categories were personal preferences, brainstorming, competence checks, supplies, and procedures. Leadership categories included decision-making, allocation and supervision of work, helping, asserting and refuting leadership, and citing norms. Frequencies of categories were not evenly distributed across tasks, committee structures, and classes. (RH)

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Taking Charge: Kindergarteners' Planning and Leadership Talk during Committee Work

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the value of cooperative committee work in kindergarten by delineating the features of the ensuing planning and leadership talk. 66 lower- and middle-class kindergarteners in three classes of one teacher completed designated tasks while in committees. Transcriptions of the sessions were analyzed for emergent categories of planning and leadership and their relative prevalence per task. More specific tasks resulted in more restructuring of academic content, but less or no decision-making talk. More child choice of topic or activity resulted in extensive leadership and planning experiences, but less academic content. Committees structured by interest were freed from topic choice conflict. Committee work enriches kindergarteners' opportunities to take charge of their own work. This study provides a framework for exploring the values of cooperative small group work in kindergarten.

Taking charge: Kindergarteners' planning and leadership talk during committee work.

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The objective of this study was to delineate characteristic features of kindergarten students' planning and leadership talk under the conditions of small group committee work. This objective was selected in order to verify that the processes of committee work have value even for young children. A committee was a group of 4-5 children selected by the teacher to work cooperatively on a designated task related to the week's academic theme or unit.

Literature Review

Small group work is not presently a common occurrence in schools in United States (Goodlad, 1984). Yet there are many research studies which indicate its value for students. Gains in academic achievement from cooperative learning that includes a group goal and individual accountability have been demonstrated by Slavin (1983) and Johnson and Johnson (1987). Cohen (1986) includes growth in oral language proficiency, social skills and interpersonal relationships along with intellectual gains as outcomes of groupwork. Studies of collaborative learning from a Vygotskian perspective (Bayer, 1990; Chang & Wells, 1988; Foreman & Cazden, 1985) suggest that peer interaction serves as scaffolding with which students work through the zone of proximal development. Descriptions of classrooms where project work does occur routinely (Katz, 1988; Kierstead, 1986; Moffet, 1973; Wasserman, 1989) portray intensely involved, self-motivated, academically engaged students.

The above studies have focused on small group work in the elementary grades. However, kindergarten and primary students may also benefit from this structure. The techniques and processes of committee work in these early years has been documented in a series of pamphlets (Evans & Nelson, 1974; Hughes, Weaver, Martin, & Lammers, 1974) under the direction of Hughes as she conceptualized the Tucson Early Education Model (TEEM) in Arizona and at the University of New Mexico. Loughlin (1988) has further codified the parameters of committee work as derived from the work of Hughes.

Considering the potential value of kindergarten group work, the present author in collaboration with a kindergarten teacher incorporated committees into the classroom routine. We were interested in whether the students working cooperatively on science, language arts, and social studies activities, but without the individual accountability of upper grades, would take charge of their work, stay engaged, and experience peer leadership. The present study examines the planning and leadership talk within the committees as indications of the values of small group work for kindergarten children. The unit of analysis is the committee task.

Methodology

Committee Processes

Subjects. The subjects were the 66 kindergarten children of one teacher in a public school serving lower- and middle-class predominantly White and some Black and Hispanic children. Three different classes were used in this study: The May 1989 afternoon class, and the November-March 1989-90 morning and afternoon kindergartens.

Committee structure. For the 1989 grouping, the kindergarten teacher established five committees each containing four children. She chose the members of each committee to balance ability, sex, ethnicity, dominance, and attention in order to provide as much heterogeneity as possible. The five 1990 committees were established on the same bases, but some were composed of five members. Two variations in membership were included in 1990. For one repeated task, the children chose their own 4-5 member committees; for another, the committees were formed by interest.

Committee procedures. Generally, the committees met in the regular classroom. The teacher introduced the 2 hour free play time with a detailed description of a special project and the committee work both of which were related to the theme of the week. Successively, one committee at a time met to complete a cooperative task. Each committee worked about 20-30 minutes until finished. Although the teacher monitored the special project and the researcher supervised the committees, both adults also moved throughout the room interacting with other students. The teacher and the researcher were available for questions, but did not stay with the committee members, who were instructed to handle problems independently.

Committee tasks. The five committee tasks used in the 1989 class were 1) To create a list of items each child needed to bring for a tadpole collecting excursion; 2) To record on a mural observations of live silkworms; 3) To create a mural informing next year's kindergarteners about dinosaurs; 4) To choose a follow-up activity to do after a trip to the fire station; 5) To execute the chosen follow-up activity.

The eight tasks implemented in the 1990 classes were: 1) To create a mobile from a collection of seasonal fall plants; 2) To record on a chart the results of testing which items sank or floated; 3) To create a mural demonstrating what the group knew about Indians; 4) To create a TV program on a paper scroll; 5) To create a TV program on a paper scroll under the condition of self-chosen membership on the committee; 6) To make a book of a fairy tale; 7) To dramatize a fairy tale with committee membership determined by choice of favorite story; 8) To show the whole class what the committee knew about dental health.

Evaluations. In whole class meetings after the free play period, the committees' work was reviewed. In 1989, this review took the form of an evaluation during which a child assigned to be "checker" reported on group participation and problems. The murals of these committees were displayed in the halls. Their fire station follow-up activity involved a performance before the whole class. For 1990, on the other hand, each of the committee's products or performance was displayed, sometimes by the teacher, sometimes by the members. Only the

last two tasks were evaluated by the children. It is anticipated that evaluations of the 1989 type will be conducted during the May committees which will replicate the 1989 silkworm, dinosaur, and fire station follow-up tasks.

Data Sources

The committee sessions were recorded on audio-tape. In 1989, a Sony recorder was used. In 1990, a Marantz recorder with a "sound-grabber" microphone enhanced reception. The tapes were reviewed frequently. The researcher made transcriptions of tapes which were clear and which represented the different types of committee structures. Individual children were not usually identified in the transcriptions. For 1989, the tapes recording the planning and leadership episodes during the discussions about the silkworm and dinosaur murals and the choice of an activity after the fire station visit were transcribed completely (see Appendix for a sample transcription excerpt). There were five committees for each of these tasks, leading to a set of 15 transcriptions for 1989. For 1990, the TV (self-chosen), fairy tale book (teacher-assigned), fairy tale dramatization (chosen by interest), and the dental health presentation (teacher-assigned) committees were selected to be transcribed. There were 27 committee sessions transcribed for 1990.

The execution of the fire station follow-up activities was observed and reported by the teacher. Discussions between the researcher and the teacher before, during, and after the committee sessions were recorded later in log notes. Some notations were made during class on the actions and comments of specific committee members. The committee products (lists, murals, plays, and books) were other data sources.

Data Analysis

One of the purposes for introducing committees into a kindergarten class is to provide additional opportunities for children to plan, direct, and execute their work cooperatively and independently. To find out whether this goal was being accomplished, the 1989 tapes were reviewed for features of committee talk that differed from from those of free play and teacher-directed sessions. Planning and leadership talk that focused on implementing an academic task associated with the theme of the week were the major features that distinguished committee work.

The first stage of the analysis involved examining and coding the transcripts of the 15 committee sessions of 1989 to derive categories of planning and leadership talk. Although the two functions of language sometimes occurred together, they were coded separately. Then the planning and leadership talk of the 1990 transcriptions was checked for presence of these categories. Examining the 1990 transcripts led to refinements, reorganizations, and additions, but not deletions of the categories. The data were then reduced to transcriptions of planning and leadership episodes of the 1989 committees and four of the 1990 tasks representative of the different products and structures. These transcripts were coded for the categories. The frequency of each category per task was computed.

The second stage of the analysis was directed to discovering the distribution of the various categories across contexts such as: tasks, committee structures, and classes. The prevalence of each category for each task was charted. In addition, analysis of the products and teacher reports resulted in indices of involvement and academic engagement.

Results

The committee work of these kindergarten classes required a group product related to the theme of the week. To create this product, the committees worked cooperatively, overcoming their disagreements and problems without adult control. In contrast to the free play activities, the option of abandoning the group or task did not exist. Under these conditions, planning and leadership talk was extensive and intense as the students took charge of their work. The characteristic features of this talk were delineated by deriving descriptive categories and determining their distribution across tasks. The results include a listing of the categories with definitions and examples, and a chart of the relative prevalence of the major categories across the set of tasks.

The planning categories which emerged were: personal preferences, brainstorming, competence checks, supplies, and procedures The leadership categories included: decision-making, allocation of work, supervising work, helping, asserting and refuting leadership, and citing norms. In the examples that are reported below, a new line indicates a change of speaker and double spacing indicates a change to another episode.

Planning Categories

Personal preferences. Statements of choices of items to draw, role to play, or type of product to create.

Dino-saur: I'll draw the plants.

Drama: I'll be the fox.

Dental: I want to make a book.

Brainstorming. Listing of specific items to be included.

Silk-worm: I know what we could do. We could draw three butterflies, three cocoons, three caterpillars, three leafs.

Competence check. Questioning of ability to draw, write, or sing.

Fairy Book: But how are we going to know to write the names, the words?
Well, I don't know. Just make fake words.

Supplies. Naming or reporting of needed materials either at the beginning or during the work of the committee.

Fairy Book: Why don't we get the book and look?

Procedures. Statement about the arrangement of supplies, seating, or actors.

Drama: You're supposed to be close to the king

The planning involved extensive negotiations and resulted in unique products from each committee. Therefore, the committee processes did provide an opportunity for kindergarten children to take charge of their work.

Leadership Categories

Decision-making. Taking an inventory of personal preferences, organizing a vote, asserting consensus, refuting agreements, compromising, synthesizing.

Fire Station: What does everybody want?

Raise your hand, if you want to do pictures.

Dental: You guys, we got to all agree on the same thing.
We're all going to do the puppet show.
No, we're not...
Yeah, but we should write a book, it's easier.
Puppet show.
You can make things like a book. You can tell a story for the puppet show.

Allocation of work. Assigning jobs or roles to committee members.

Dino-saur: You're going to draw the sky. You're plants. And I'm going to draw the dinosaurs.

Drama: T. can be the little red hen. You can be the pig. You will be the cat. I'll be the dog.

Supervising work. Checking progress, participation, or requirements

TV: He don't want to draw. B.'s not doing it.

Dino-saur: Have you done your dinosaur? Where is it? Show me.

Get over here, K. What in the world are you doing?
K., why don't you start getting to work? You're the one who's wasting our time here.

Ok. We've got to have some words, must have a sky, must have plants, three different kinds of dinosaurs. We don't have letters.

Helping. Explaining or instructing.

TV: You make the presents, Ok?
I can't make the presents.
Well, just make squares. And then make a little bow.

Drama: Come on, you're supposed to say something. Say it.
The sky is falling.
No, I say the sky is falling. You say where are you going.

Asserting and refuting leadership. Arguments about the management roles

Dental: No, you ain't the boss.

Drama: I'm the director.
No, I am. (several repetitions)
I'm going to tell you-all who you-all are going to be.
Ok. P.'s the director.
No, You're not telling no one.

Norms. Stating a rule or custom as justification for committee processes.

Dental: You can't come over here, because this is a private zone (said to visitor from another committee).

TV: You-all can't pick Mickey Mouse and the circus. We taken it (said to another committee).

Fairy Book: 3 against 1. We win.
I want ninjas.
I know it. Sorry, 3 against 1 is better.

You can't make the same thing I make.

You got to do it yourself (as in "Do your own work").

Drama: She said she's going to be Chicken Little first. And then he said it. So she's going to be Chicken Little.

Dinosaur: We better work, because if we talk too much, talk, talk, talk, then we can't get our work done.
Yeah.

In all the committee sessions, some children assumed leadership roles. Although the tasks were set by the teacher, they were ambiguous and required interpretation and cooperation to be completed. Clearly the committee structure provided an opportunity for kindergarten children to experience leadership.

Category Distribution

The frequency of the categories of planning and leadership were not evenly distributed across tasks, committee structures, and classes. Table I displays these variations for the committee tasks of this study. The silkworm, dinosaur, and fairy tale drama tasks required specific content. The fire station, TV, fairy tale book, and dental health tasks provided choice of topic or activity. The TV committees were structured by student choice of membership, while the fairy tale drama committees were determined by interest. The silkworm, dinosaur, and fire station tasks belonged to the 1989 class; the TV, fairy tale book and drama, and dental health tasks came from the 1990 classes.

For each task, the prevalence (by rank-order) or absence of the major planning and leadership categories has been entered into the table. The number of occurrences of the most prevalent category (rank 1) and the least prevalent category (rank 4) are recorded below the chart. The implications of these variations will be found in the conclusions and discussion section.

Insert Table I here

Teacher Reports and Products

The teacher reported that, for the tadpole excursion all children brought the necessary items, an indication that their planning had been appropriate and memorable. The teacher also identified individual children who performed in ways unexpected to her: assuming the role of spokesman, director, narrator, or resource person. She stated that committee work was more eagerly anticipated in the 1989 class than in the 1990 classes.

The fire station follow-up activities presented the best evidence of student involvement and self-motivation. Despite a five day interval, all committees remembered their decisions and prepared and executed their projects independently. These follow-up activities were so popular that the students requested and added more committee work on subsequent days to participate in additional projects. In several ways, the teacher documented the involvement, excitement, and academic engagement of her students. The murals, performances, and books depicted details indicating knowledge of the science, social studies, and literary content.

Conclusions and Discussion

The frequency of the categories of planning and leadership were not evenly distributed across tasks, committee structures, and classes. These variations with some possible explanations will be discussed in this section. They should be considered tentative, since the final results depend on additional information from replication of the three 1989 tasks (silkworm, dinosaur and fire station) in May, 1990.

Task Effects

Specificity. The specificity of the task affected the frequency of the categories of planning and leadership talk produced. The dinosaur mural had the most specific requirements: three different dinosaurs, plants, sky, and letters within a time limit. Under these conditions planning involved mostly stating preferences for particular animals or features to draw. Leadership assumed the form of supervising the progress of the committee, especially by checking whether all requirements were met, the participation of all members, and the time (See Table I for the relative prevalence of the categories.)

The silkworm task was also a mural. It called for drawing based on observations. Under these conditions, brainstorming was the most frequent type of planning. Some leadership was shown when a child allocated jobs to individual children or supervised progress, participation, and behavior.

The fairy tale dramatization contained specificity in the teacher's list of three well-known tales: Chicken Little, The Gingerbread Boy, and The Little Red Hen. The children's choice of their favorite story determined the committee membership. As can be seen in Table I, most of the planning for the dramatization involved stating preferences for roles. Leadership experience was gained during the struggle to accommodate role preferences with or without a child-appointed director. There was no competence checking. Although in other tasks, a child often questioned his/her ability to draw, sing, or write, no child doubted ability to act out the story. Nevertheless, help was often given by instructions about what to say or do. There were many accurate renditions of story segments and literary content in this task.

Notably absent, as indicated on Table I, was any decision-making talk in all three of these tasks. It seems that when the task is very specific, there is no need for the children to reach consensus on what to do. (In the TV scroll task, decision-making was also absent, but for a reason which will be explained later.)

Academic content. In all tasks, stating personal preferences was a frequent part of planning. However, in the dinosaur, fairy tale drama, and silkworm tasks, these statements uniquely displayed precise terminology, background knowledge, and restructuring of scientific or literary content.

Literary content was anticipated from the fairy tale book task, but did not materialize. This seemed like a specific task to the teacher, but it proved to be a perplexing one for the children. They were unsure about what a fairy tale was. Therefore, much of their

planning consisted of stating favorite titles and brainstorming possible choices. Decision-making filled much of the time and resulted in some books about fairy tales, as well as some about jungles and ninja turtles. Disagreements were usually handled by majority rule, and out-voted students barely participated. Little time and attention were devoted to the drawings. Hence, the literary content of these committees was restricted to titles and a few "favorite things."

The dental health task, to show your classmates what you know, elicited planning and leadership talk that was similar to that of the fairy tale book. First the children stated preferences and brainstormed possible products or activities. Leadership emerged in reaching a decision through voting and compromising (such as, a rap and an accompanying book) and supervising the activity. The demonstrations were complex (puppet show, rap, book, play, etc.). The children spent much time planning, preparing, and presenting their programs as can be seen in the high number of occurrences of categories for this task in Table I. However, the dental information conveyed was general (as with the fairy tale book) and consisted mostly of references to cavities, bad food, and a dentist.

The fire station follow-up choice elicited a rank order of categories that was similar to the dental health task. Stating preferences led to decision-making, usually through voting, or taking an inventory of preferences. Leadership included checking whether members had the competence to perform the activity.

The fairy tale book, dental health, and fire station tasks all required the committees to make a choice within certain parameters. Thus they had the opportunity to make decisions and implement their own plans in relation to the theme of the week. The involvement and excitement for the open-ended activities were noted by the adults. The choice of topic (fairy tale book), however, did not elicit committee engagement. In general, when much committee time was devoted to a choice, there was not as much content talk as with the more specific tasks (silkworm, dinosaur, dramatization)

Committee Structure

The TV scroll task was repeated. The first time, teacher-assigned groups were used. Some committees did not reach consensus on a topic. For instance, two boys preferred ninja turtles while the girls opted for rainbows. The teacher wondered if self-selected committees would reconcile differences. For the second TV scroll task, the children were invited to form their own groups of 4 members. While these committees were forming and reforming, pairs of children discussed their plans of what to draw. The final self-selected groups were not homogeneous as to gender. When the committees came to work on the scroll, preferences were stated, jobs were allocated, and detailed drawings were quickly completed without any signs of decision-making. It was concluded that the students formed their committees on the basis of commonality of interests. The rank-ordering of frequencies of categories for the dramatization group is similar to that of the TV committee. The implication is that committees based on common interests may be freed from the topic choice conflicts of teacher-assigned committees, and freed to concentrate on implementing the task.

Class Variations

A few differences between the 1989 and the 1990 classes were noted. Extra categories of helping and giving instruction were added to the list upon analysis of the 1990 classes. Help was requested on what to do, as well as how to do it. These categories may represent unfamiliarity with school as well as with committees. The 1990 classes seemed less enthusiastic about committees, and more desirous of returning to free play. It may be that the end of the year is more appropriate. Or it could be that the tasks were less appealing. A replication of the May 1989 tasks in 1990 could clarify this difference. Also, the 1990 classes had less opportunity to reflect upon committee processes, since evaluations were only introduced toward the end of the study. The evaluations in 1989 seemed to lead to an awareness of the effect of committee decisions and proscriptions on individuals, as well as a sense of group accomplishment.

Norms

The norms cited by individual children can serve as indices of the kindergarteners' understanding or misunderstanding of committee processes. The "We all have to do the same thing" plaint was interpreted by one committee to mean that each member should draw the same picture, whereas the teacher had used "same" to apply to topic or product choice. In contrast, the no-copying and do-your-own-work proscriptions were announced by several committees for work both within and among committees. These rules were not included in the teacher's instructions, and the children were encouraged to help each other. Majority rule and saying-it-first were the norms for solving conflicts. The automatic application of these two seemed to inhibit discussions of compromise or synthesis. The not-talking norm was directly counter to most of a committee's work, and, fortunately, was not actualized. Not working or participating was negatively sanctioned in most committees. Often the targeted child explained the reasons, such as confusion, conflicting interests, or problems (see Appendix). These discussions seemed to help the committee members understand each other.

Some of these norms belong to the peer culture, and some to the school culture. They could be explored during the teacher's instructions and during the evaluation sessions to allow the kindergarten children to consider alternatives.

Educational Importance

Incorporating committee work into the kindergarten classroom enriches the children's opportunities to take charge of their own work. This study has delineated some features of kindergarteners' planning and leadership during committees and their distribution across types of tasks. The frequency of different planning and leadership categories seemed to depend on the various parameters of the task and structures. The tasks were developmentally appropriate (Bredekamp, 1987) in their provisions for child choice, exploration, interaction, and cooperation,

but were unusual for kindergarten in the requirement for a group product. Further research is needed to clarify the effects of tasks and structures on planning and leadership experiences, and to elaborate this framework for discovering the values of small group work in kindergarten.

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Appendix
Transcription Excerpts

Fire Station

We're, me and D. are the fireman.
Ok.
Me and D. are fireman.
Yeah, the fireman in the play, ok?
And you-all two are the kindergartens.
S., stop playing a game.
Why don't me and D. be the fire fighters, 'coz we're the littlest, right?...are 6 (years old), too.
S. wasn't planning.
Yeah, you were playing around.

S.: When I play around that makes me think gooder, ok? And when I sit down and be still like you are, that makes my mind go away. Ok? Now I don't even know anything.
Uh huh
S.: I don't.
You say you don't know anything. You know what (xxx) means.
S.: Well I don't what to plan for when I'm doing this right here.
See, we're going to have a play. You see.
S.: ok, ok
And a ... mural. You know what a mural is...
S.: Please don't tell. Please. We'll do better than we did on the dinosaurs.
What?
S.: We'll be better than we were on the dinosaurs.
'Coz I want to do a mural.
S.: Yeah, we're good at those. Well don't tell them then later on.
Ok, we won't

Dinosaur Mural

We can draw this one and that one, tyrannosaurus res. We can draw this one. Ok, yeah, know what, hey, we can draw this one. Yeah, fossil, fern, all the plants, giant dinosaur. We're going to put rex. We got him.
That wasn't tyrannosaurus rex. We got that one. Hey this one.
I don't need anything. This one. Take tyrannosaurus rex.
I already said that.
Stegosaurus. Yes, stegosaurus. Let's take this one and that one.
Yep.
I'm doing this one. Golly, look at, brontosaurus, pterodactyl, pteranodon and a beautiful (plant) and you write one. Hey, let's draw duckbill.
Uh, uh. Now time is really running out.
We're finished. We're finished. We got a good thing.
Do we got all the things:
Yeah. Go tell her.

Table I

Prevalence (by rank-order*) or Absence of Planning and Leadership Categories across Tasks.

Category	Tasks						
	Silk-worm	Dino-saur	Fire-station	TV	Fairy Book	Drama	Dental Health
Personal Preference	3	2	1	1	1	1	1
Brain-storming	1	4	+	0	2	0	2
Competence Check	+	+	3	3	+	0	+
Decision-Making	0	0	2	0	3	0	3
Allocation of Work	4	3	+	2	4	2	+
Supervising Work	2	1	4	4	+	4	4
Helping	+	+	+	+	+	3	+
Number of occurrences for rank 1	24	74	37	28	35	60	90
Number of occurrences for rank 4	10	9	4	2	4	10	60

* Rank-order: 1-4 represents the categories of planning or leadership talk which occurred from most frequently to frequently in the particular task.

+ indicates some occurrence of a category.

0 indicates no occurrence of this category in the particular task.